Thinking like a psychologist

You are learning about...	You are learning how to...
The confirmatory bias and its role in some people's belief in ESP and other psychic phenomena	Think like a psychologist Look for alternative explanations Spot biases in thinking

Do you believe in extraordinary powers?

In each of the following example, extra-sensory perception (ESP) or some other strange power might be at work. On the other hand, there could be an alternative explanation that doesn't require us to believe in ESP. Read each scenario and come up with an explanation that does not require a belief in extraordinary powers (scenarios 1-3 are adapted from Halonen & Gray, 2001).

- You are sitting in your room and find yourself humming a tune. You turn on the radio and the song you have been singing comes on. You smile to yourself and think that your ability to predict music is a bit uncanny.
- Brenda has a reputation for being able to predict the sex of unborn children. She places a hand on the abdomen of the expectant mother and clears her mind. Presently, she will get a 'feeling' that the baby is a boy or a girl. Before ultrasound scans were routinely used to detect the sex of unborn children, Brenda was well known for her ability and was often sought out by expectant parents.
- Pat occasionally gets 'bad feelings'. Her heart starts to race and she suddenly knows that 'something bad' is going to happen, sometimes to a loved one but most of the time to a stranger whose bad luck is reported on the TV.
- John has gone with his friends to see a famous Psychic who has appeared on the TV and is doing a stage show. He doesn't really believe 'in all that psychic stuff'. During the evening, the Psychic says that she is getting a message from 'the other side' for someone named John, and asks if he is in the room. John puts his hand up. The Psychic says, 'I sense an older male figure in your life, who wants you to know whilst you may have had disagreements in your life, he still loved you.' John immediately thinks of his father, and is amazed at the Psychic's ability to communicate with the dead.

Beware the confirmatory bias!

'Confirmatory bias' refers to people's tendency to pay attention to evidence that fits in with their beliefs and to ignore or overlook evidence that conflicts with their beliefs. We saw a demonstration of the confirmatory bias today when, because people believed that a video was influencing someone's guesses, it didn't occur to them that the guesses might be influencing the video.

How might the confirmatory bias play a part in people's belief in psychic powers? Use the examples above to illustrate.

When have you been wrong about something because your thinking was biased?

References

Halonen, J. & Gray, C. (2001). *The Critical Thinking Companion for Introductory Psychology (2nd Edition).* New York, NY, Worth.